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SUBJECT: CATHOLIC CHURCH CHALLENGES GVN OVER LAND DISPUTE

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11. (SBU) Summary: A long simmering land dispute between Vietnam's Catholic Church and the GVN has heated up in recent weeks. Church leaders and their followers gather daily to pray in front of the old Vatican Embassy in Hanoi, one of many church properties taken over by the government after 1954 when former colonial power France relinquished control. While the Prime Minister's unannounced visit in December 2007 to the disputed site raised hope that the Church's long pending request for the property might be resolved, the official reaction from the Hanoi People's Committee in January called on the Church to cease the prayer vigils, calling them illegal. Recent escalations, including a scuffle between police and parishioners over the weekend, reflect the Church's determination to continue the pressure on the GVN. The Embassy has sent a diplomatic note expressing concern over the possibility of force being used against peaceful demonstrators and urging a dialogue to seek a mutually agreeable resolution to church property disputes. End Summary.

Background

12. (U) The 2.5 acre property sits next to the offices of the Hanoi Archbishop and St. Joseph's Cathedral. The main building on the property, a French-style villa, was the residence of the Vatican envoy until he was deported in 1959. The Church maintains that the land and the building were returned to the Church until 1962, when the GVN forcibly took over the land and the building. The GVN disputes this, claiming that on 24 November 1961, Father Nguyen Tung Cuong, then the Financial Administrator and Property Manager of the Archdiocese, donated the property to the government.

13. (U) The Archbishop's Office confirmed that each Hanoi Archbishop has requested the return of the property, but the Church has never received a response. Press reports quoted Duong Ngoc Tan, head of the Catholics Department under the Government Committee for Religious Affairs (CRA), as saying that the government will consider any housing or land demand in accordance with the law. He cited the Land Law, which stipulates that the State does not accept any claim for land given to other users during the implementation of land policies of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (1945-1975), the Provisional Revolutionary Government of the Republic of South Vietnam (1969-1976) and the Socialist Republic of Vietnam.

14. (U) Per Decision 23 issued by the 11th National Assembly on Nov. 26, 2003, the property was put under the management and use of the Hoan Kiem People's Committee (a local level authority under the Hanoi People's Committee) and it is under State possession. The Hanoi People's Committee stated that the property has been continuously managed and used by the Hoan Kiem District Sport Center

and the Hoan Kiem District Cultural House for 40 years and that the community still requires these services for local cultural and sports activities.

¶5. (U) In 2005, the Vietnamese Episcopal Council agreed to open an office in Hanoi. The Church, short on adequate facilities, began raising this issue with the GVN regularly, culminating in an open letter in December 2007 from Archbishop Ngo Quang Kiet and regular candlelight prayer vigils outside the property.

Recent Events

¶6. (U) In his open letter of December 15, 2007, Archbishop Kiet called on Catholic parishioners to pray for the GVN to return the property to the Church. The Archbishop criticized the central government and Hanoi authorities for not paying due attention and respect to the Church's legitimate need for land.

¶7. (U) On December 18, 2007, at the end of a Christmas performance, Catholic parishioners attending the performance formed a parade heading to the site of the former Vatican Embassy building. For just under an hour, hundreds stood outside in prayer. Candles were lit, and a statue of the Virgin Mary was brought onto the property and erected in front of the building. Parishioners conducted similar prayer vigils over the following weeks and parishioners from different parishes attended evening services at the Cathedral, and joined the vigils afterward.

¶8. (U) On December 30, 2007, Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung made an unannounced visit to the offices of the Archbishop, had a private meeting with him, and then walked to the site of the disputed property. While GVN-controlled newspapers and media did not report the visit, Viet Catholic News Agency, run by overseas Vietnamese, posted pictures on their website of PM Dung in conversation with the Archbishop, while looking at the former Vatican building over the fence. Other pictures showed parishioners signing a book calling for the State to return the property to the Church. While the

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Archbishop's Office stated that the content of the discussions between the Prime Minister and the Archbishop were regarding a private matter, press reports indicate the PM promised to look into the matter of the disputed land.

¶9. (U) In a rare press interview shortly after PM Dung's visit, Nguyen The Doanh, Chairman of the Government Committee on Religious Affairs, said the Church technically must not ask the State to "return" the piece of property. He hinted that a different wording should have been used, and that the State is willing to consider the Church's request for land to use for religious activities according to the law.

¶10. (SBU) Catholic insiders claim the Church has all of the records proving the land belongs to the Church, but the GVN has not asked for the documents. Father Le Trong Cung, Chief of Chancery of Hanoi Archbishop's Office, told Poloff that the GVN knows the land belongs to the Church, but can't just give it back as the GVN would lose respect. The GVN has asked the Church to apply for the land, but the Church does not feel it should have to apply for something that already belongs to it. While Fr. Cung was hopeful for a resolution in the Church's favor, he did not express any optimism that it would come any time soon.

¶11. (U) On January 14, the Hanoi People's Committee issued an official letter calling for Archbishop Kiet and the parishioners gathered for prayer vigils to cease all illegal activities, stop all violations of the laws and regulations for religious practice and remove the Virgin Mary statue from the property. The January 14 statement accused the Archbishop of "using freedom of religion to provoke protests against the government" and thus "damaging relations between Vietnam and the Vatican". (Note: The GVN and the Vatican established a Joint Working Group in late 2007 to explore conditions for the establishment of official relations. End note.) The Archbishop's Office responded in the press, blaming the Hanoi authorities for its unfair treatment, and reaffirming the right of

Catholic parishioners to gather for prayer vigils.

¶12. (SBU) On Friday, January 25, following the morning anniversary Mass commemorating the 90th birthday, 60 years as a priest, and 45 years as Bishop of Cardinal Pham Dinh Tung, between 1,500 and 2,000 parishioners and approximately 100 priests gathered at the site to pray. Poloff observed parishioners climbing over the gate at the site of the former Vatican embassy building and tearing down signs put on the building by city authorities. Reports indicate that a woman was kicked and slapped by security officers after she climbed over the gate into the courtyard to light candles and lay flowers at the statue of the Virgin Mary. A male parishioner, well-known democracy activist Le Quoc Quan attempted to come to her aid, but was also beaten and dragged away with blood pouring from his ear. The chief priest of Ham Long parish church, also chief priest in charge of Hanoi city portion of the archdiocese, then shouted through a portable loudspeaker, calling on the police to release the woman. The angry crowd of parishioners then broke through the gate in an attempt to prevent further actions by the security officers.

¶13. (U) On Saturday, January 26, the Hanoi People's Committee sent a second official letter, stating that the Archbishop's Office has allowed the situation to deteriorate, resulting in parishioners and clergy assaulting security officers, damaging government property, erecting tents on government property, and disrupting public traffic. The letter issued an ultimatum, calling for the Church to remove the Virgin Mary statue and all banners, tents, and parishioners by 5 pm, Sunday, January 27. POL staff visited the site at 4:45 pm on Sunday, January 27, and saw crowds of people singing and praying, as well as a number of onlookers waiting to see what might happen. By 5:40 pm, the crowd had grown, but no government action was taken.

¶14. (SBU) On January 28, the embassy sent a diplomatic note to the MFA and the Hanoi People's Committee asking for clarification of reports that Vietnamese officials have called the current demonstrations illegal. We noted that the threat or use of force against peaceful demonstrators would be of grave concern, and called for the Hanoi People's Committee to engage in a dialogue with church leaders to reach a mutually agreeable resolution regarding Church properties confiscated over the years.

Comment

¶15. (SBU) This long simmering land dispute is one of many lingering land issues left over from the communist takeover in the 1950's, many involving the Catholic Church. With six million faithful representing about seven percent of the population, the Catholic community in Vietnam is significant. Issues of religious freedom

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remain in Vietnam, but this particular dispute is less about ideology than it is about valuable land. The property in question is in the center of the city, close to tourist sites and businesses, and would be extremely valuable to developers in Hanoi's booming real estate market.

¶16. (SBU) While the incident on January 25 and the letters from the Hanoi People's Committee are unsettling, the muted response from the GVN is remarkable. The fact that close to 2000 people were able to gather and call for a change in government policy related to the Catholic Church without significant police action or GVN reprisal in part reflects a sufficient feeling of comfort on both sides that the Church can air its grievances publicly and the state feels it can tolerate them. The GVN also recognizes that its improved position internationally with respect to religious freedom has been hard won and is still on shaky ground. Contacts tell us that the Vatican is watching events closely, particularly with regard to the ultimatum issued by the Hanoi People's Committee. With international observers watching closely and the Catholic Church determined to continue the prayer vigils, the ball is now in the GVN's court. End comment.